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Portland Waterfront Sign: Casco Bay's Four Thousand Years of Sustainable, Stable Productivity

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Native Americans harvested this rich estuary, camping on Casco Bay islands to hunt, fish, and dig clams.

Prehistoric spear and harpoon points, fish bones, and shell heaps found on Casco Bay islands help trace ancient peoples' late winter, spring, and summer camps. While evidence of ancestral Wabanaki (*People of the Dawn Lands*) dates back 2000 years, other artifacts reach back over 4000 years. Though the first people likely walked into Maine 12000 years ago – here, rising sea levels washed away any record of those first 9000 years of human presence.

Imagine the centuries of Native American cookouts that it took to create this midden (mound) of discarded shells in mid-coast Maine.

[Photo: 1886] Oyster midden site was active from 2200-1100 BP

The softshell clam middens once found on Casco Bay's islands are still being lost to rising sea levels.

4000-5000 year old point

Indigenous peoples' intimate knowledge of the Bay's ecosystems helped them survive this dynamic coastal system. They hunted, fished, and gathered using sophisticated tools made of wood, stone, bone, and clay.

Using weirs, nets, and spears, Indians harvested fishruns
[Left: Plummets, a sinker weight for a fishing net]

Susquehanna-era point may be 3000 years old
[Nathan Hamilton, USVI]

2000 year old pot found in a Casco Bay island shell midden
[Bruce Bourque, Maine State Museum]

CASCO. What's in a name? In 1614, explorer Captain John Smith described "the Country of Aucocisco, in the bottome of a large deepe bay, full of many great Iles." **Aucocisco** (*uh-kos-is-co*), captures the sound of this Mi'kmaq word in English. It means "head of bay, mud." **Is Casco a clipped form of Aucocisco's last syllable?**

Or, some Wabanaki scholars suggest the **Abenaki word kasqu'** (*Great Blue Heron*) became "Casco." Since migrating peoples usually named places for unique wayfinding landmarks, it would have been unusual to name a bay for such a common bird. **How might kasqu' have become Casco?**

Native peoples depended on Casco Bay Estuary, an extremely productive natural habitat.

The Estuary's ten foot tides swept salt water upstream into freshwater streams, coves, and marshes to nurture **abundant marine life**: seabirds, shellfish, lobsters, fish, and sea mammals.

By the 1730s, Europeans had begun drastically affecting the Bay and its native residents.

Dams blocked fish runs. Disease, war, and politics displaced Wabanaki tribes. The industrial revolution would bring unchecked pollution. **This once-stable rich, ecosystem shows signs of strain.**

Some fish begin their lives in freshwater streams but spend much of their lives at sea. **Alewives, sturgeon, salmon, and stripers** returned upstream to spawn until hydro dams blocked their passage

Archeologists find many **DEER** bones in Casco Bay's prehistoric shell middens

Early Mainers hunted **SEA MINK** and **Seals**. During the 1800s' booming fur trade, sea mink were hunted to extinction

Once plentiful, **COD** grew big enough to eat mature lobsters

LOBSTER anyone? For at least 4000 years, harvesting shellfish has been a part of Casco Bay life

Many Wabanaki consider the earliest occupants of Casco Bay to be their ancestors. Today's **WABANAKI** include: Passamaquoddy, Penobscot, Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, and Abenaki. They maintain an active maritime culture – hunting, fishing, and gathering

[At right] 1000 year-old carved walrus tooth found in Casco Bay midden

Native peoples hunted the **STURGEON** which grew to over 14 feet

As climate changed over time, marine life changed too. **CLAMS** replaced Quahogs and Oysters

■ **GLACIERS** carve coast 22000 years ago

■ **CLIMATE WARMS**, glaciers retreat First Mainers arrive 12000 years ago

■ **RISING SEA LEVELS** wash away signs of possible human use

■ **CLIMATE STABILIZES** about 4000 BP Sustainable rich habitat

■ **EUROPEANS DISRUPT ECOSYSTEM** 1730s settlements: Dams block fish runs

■ **NATIVE AMERICANS** leave behind remains of cod, clams

Casco Bay over time

Casco Bay Estuary
PARTNERSHIP